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British Imperialism 450
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Mesopotamian Campaign

The narrative of the Mesopotamian Campaign that the British wanted to end World War 1 and come to a truce with the Ottomans is false. The British did not want peace, but instead, the end of the Ottoman Empire. The purpose of the Mesopotamian Campaign was done in order to dissolve the Ottoman Empire and to gain Iraq and Syria (which were not yet formed as countries).The British no doubt had their share in causing the destruction of most of Europe and the Ottoman Empire in World War 1 with efforts to win it instead of prevent it from getting out of hand. If Britain wanted a truce, why did they send so much support and fight until they had captured the land? In this paper, I will investigate Britain’s involvement while tying in together with what was going on in Europe at the time and the impact of both campaigns.

World War 1 began on July 28th 1914. This is because of the Arch Bishop Duke Franz-Ferdinand being assassinated and Austria-Hungary invading Serbia for not cooperating in the investigation to see if Serbia had involvement with the assassination. Russia then declared war on Austria-Hungary in an effort to back their ally. The Bosnian Crisis was an event where Serbs (a key amount) living in Bosnia and Herzegovina wanted to unite Serbia and Bosnia into Yugoslavia. Austria-Hungary was opposed to

this and Russia was for it. There is speculation today that Russia wanted to connect the Slavic states in their empire. The Mesopotamian Campaign started on November 6th months after WWI began. Originally, the Ottomans had no part in the war. Germany had a choice of either the Italy or the Ottoman Empire. Because of the Italian-Turkish War, tensions were high between the two countries and there was some dispute over who should own what was Libya (Tripoli) at that time. Although Germany was part of the Central Power and would not betray their ally, they ultimately chose the Ottomans in order to cut off trade ports of the poorly industrialized Russia. The Ottomans were already helping Germany out with fighting Russia by assisting their naval bombardment of Russia. Italy, out of fear of an Austria-Hungarian attack, meanwhile allied with France and Britain after realizing that France was set on recapturing Alsace-Lorraine (rich in coal and iron ore, the most needed minerals at that time) back from Germany that they had lost so long ago. Italy was now aware that France was a non-threat to them. Britain wanted war. Britain already hated Germany for the Moroccan Crisis. The Moroccan Crisis helped to build the threat of Germany to Great Britain's ally France. Germany could turn Britain's colonies against them by offering independence in exchange for a revolt. They were set on blaming the Germans for wanting to dominate Europe and saying that they were ruthless killers. With the stage set, they were able to convince their citizens and the international community that Germany had to be stopped and the Ottomans were looking to expand into Europe. The only way, according to

the British to prevent the Ottomans from succeeding was to divide up where Turkey is now into little states and capture Iraq and Syria from the Ottomans. This is what the Treaty of Sevres hoped to achieve by the end of the war.

Britain came well prepared for the beginning of the war. In the event of a shortage of personnel or equipment, officers would make a claim and it would be flown back (through mail) to the headquarters at either UK or British India (1, page 8). From there, they would decide if the call was worthwhile or not. Soldiers would also report the sick or wounded for the purpose of explaining if it were their fault, or if it were the systems fault (1, page 8). Historically, Kuwait was part of the Ottoman Empire. This was until 1752 when it became a British protectorate. The vast majority of British soldiers were from British India. Kuwait soldiers also helped out, first by letting the British land there and by sending tens of thousands of soldiers to fight on their behalf. Basra was the first city to be captured by the British. This was done in order to reach Kurna. Once this was achieved, this gained Britain “the advantages of commanding military value the whole navigable waterway to the Gulf, the moral effect of the Arabs” (1, page 15). This proved to be not enough as it did not assure the supply of oil in Iraq. It was crucial for Britain to capture Baghdad; this would assure their victory in the region. This would allow for no problems of river transport. This also gave way for Nile gun boats, tugs, steam launches (coming from Egypt), and paddlers to name a few. These were all located on the rivers. This war was

no easy campaign as much of the British got sick and died of Typhus or had starved to near death due to the land being deserted and not enough crops to live off of.

In the letters from Mesopotamia (provided by Robert Palmer), the author goes into great detail of what it was like to fight in the war. Robert Palmer, a British descendant living in India, volunteered saying that “there is no adequate reason not to;” (Palmer 1918, 5). This was written on April 25th, 1915 to his mother during the beginning of the war. Volunteers were needed at this time to fill gaps in the Persian Gulf “one subaltern, one sergeant, and thirty men from each battalion” (Palmer 1918, 5). The ship Robert had entered was described as “grossly overcrowded- 1,200 on board an ordinary 6,000 ton liner” with “convalescents rejoining the regular battalion” (Palmer 1918, 22). The conditions in Iraq were not well. Many of the British soldiers were becoming sick. In a letter to his father dated on September 4th 1915, he said “when we arrived here, was nominally nearly 300 strong, but actually it could hardly have paraded 100.This reduction is all due to sickness. The deaths from all of causes only total between forty and fifty, out of the original 800: and of these about twenty-five, I think, were killed in action” (Palmer 1918, 41). He later goes on to say “next to heat and malaria, more men have been knocked out by sores and boils than by any disease” (Palmer 1918, 41). The Ottomans were well equipped; Robert explains in detail that “The Turks had, they think, 15,000 men and 32 guns. Their position was twelve miles long and most elaborately entrenched and

wired with all the German devices, and rested on a marsh at either end. We had about 10,000 men of all arms and 25 or 27 guns, seven of them on river boats, I think. Townshend's attack was as follows. He made all his reconnaissance's and preparations as for an attack on their right flank, and on Monday, 27th he deployed a brigade, A. on that side of the river, leaving only two battalions, B. on the right bank, and keeping two battalions in reserve, C." (Palmer 1918, 60). At this time, Robert was in Basra at this time advancing to Kut and had taken in "about 1,300 prisoners" (Palmer 1918, 61). Also, Robert was questioning the intent of the Germans believing that their actions were a "makes no difference in that it was a national and not an individual act" (Palmer 1918, 62). He, like many other soldiers left the door open of Germany being innocent of acts of wars, but he did not doubt the British Empires intent.

On October 31, 1915, in Roberts's letter to his friend N.B., Robert is informed that fifty submarines were coming according to his friend. Robert had doubts about receiving this saying ""I do hope your "fifty submarines" is true"" (Palmer 1918, 75). Robert also explains how the war planned has changed saying "When it began, they only meant to secure the oil-pipe and protect British interests at Basra. But they found to their great surprise that you can't stay comfortably on the lower waters of a great river with an enemy above you any more than you could live in a flat with the lodger above continually threatening your life. A river like the Tigris or Euphrates is a unit, and the power which occupies its mouth will inevitably be drawn

to its sources unless it meets the boundaries of a strong and civilized state on the way. Turkey will be neither after the war." (Palmer 1918, 75). In this letter, Robert also expands on the campaign and where they are at "Dec. - Jan. We occupied the Shattal-Arab as far as Kurnah. We sat still. The Turks, based on Nasiriyah attacked us and nearly recaptured Basra. April We beat them at Shaiba, and for safety's sake had to push them from their base. May, then the double advance to Amarah and Nasiriyah. July, we pushed the Turks out, and they promptly reformed at Kut and prepared to threaten us again. So we pushed forward again and beat them at Kut..........September ...We shall go for them there no doubt and push them back once more.......What will Turkey be like? She will be bankrupt, chaotic, totally incapable of keeping order among these murderous Bedouins" (Palmer 1918, 75-76). Robert later goes on to talk about in this letter that the rivers will never be dredged, and the Ottomans neighbors (the Arabs) will most likely cut haphazard canals to leave them to form marshes. Robert is leaving the message that the Ottomans must regain every piece of land and then hope for a miracle in order to restore the damages that have already been done to the Tigris and the Euphrates. In a December 12, 1915 letter to his friend R.K., he talks about the Tigris battle. "Well, we attacked, and carried their first line and half their second before darkness pulled us up. A successful day, though expensive in casualties. We bivouacked in their first line. Daybreak revealed the unpleasant surprise of strong enemy reinforcements, who are said to have diddled our spies by avoiding Baghdad: 5,000 of them.

As we had started the affair about 12,000 strong to their 15,000, this was serious.” (Palmer 1918, 92). He later goes on to say “The Tigris is a cork-screwed maze of mud-banks, no river for the hasty withdrawal of congested barges under fire. You can imagine the scene. Accounts differ as to what we lost. Certainly, two gunboats (destroyed), one monitor (disabled, and captured), the telegraph barge and supply barge, besides all supplies, dumped on the bank……In men from first to last us lost nearly 5,000: The Turks, about 9,000 guess of course” (Palmer 1918, 92). In this battle, Robert tells how the Siege of Kut happened over a day’s span. It was proven unsuccessful and by dawn, the British had retreated. This is because their men were exhausted. The British got back to Kut and retrieved it five days later, but the loss was “enormous” due to all of their supplies at Kut being taken from them.

In a letter on Christmas to his friend N.B., Robert explains his change of opinion against his previous disapproval for the advance to Baghdad. “They were twofold (1) Military, that we should not have the force to hold it and our communications would be too vulnerable. These objections have been largely met (a) by large reinforcements, which will nearly double our forces when they are all up (b) by the monitors--- the second is here now ; they solve the communication problem” (Palmer 1918, 96). Robert also goes into detail of the Russian influence on the region saying “(2) politically. I thought the occupation of Baghdad would cause trouble (a) with Russia, (b) with Indian soldiers, (c) with Moslems generally. Here again (a) P. tells me

Russia is giving us a free hand, (b) with Indian soldiers, (c) with Moslems generally. Here again (a) P. tells me Russia is giving us a free hand, (b) trouble did occur with some Indian Regiments, but it took the mild form of a strike, and the disaffected units have been dispersed by Coys over the lines of communications" (Palmer 1918, 96).

The book publishes letters from officers that came after Roberts's unfortunate death at Kut. One of the officers who fought during the attack on the Turkish position of Um El Hanna, on January 21st, 1916 describes the event. He talks about how on January 20th, their guns bombarded the enemy's trenches at intervals during the day, and on the following morning, at 3 a.m., they moved out of the camp preparatory to attack which was to commence about 6:30 a.m.. At 7:55 a.m., after their guns had bombarded the enemy's trenches for ten minutes, the British infantry were ordered to advance to attack, our support line advancing at the same time. As soon as the British left the trenches, they were under a heavy rifle fire, and as they advanced, it became more and more intense, with machine gun and shrapnel fire added. It was an absolute slaughter. The British continued to advance till they got to within about 150 yards of the enemy's trenches. By this time, the British's casualties were so heavy that it was impossible to press home the attack without reinforcements, though at the extreme left of the British's line, their troops got into the first line of trenches, but were combed out them again by the Turks. No reinforcements reached them in time. The weather at the time was terrible all day and night with heavy rain

with a bitter cold wind coming off the snow hills. An officer who was also there said "the fighting on the 21st was a pure slaughter. It was too awful" (Palmer 1918, 125).

An officer who fought during the Battle of Hanna describes the plan to retake Kut. It was viewed as essential to establish Artillery on the right bank of the Tigris, so as to support, by enfilading fire, the attack of our Infantry against the Hannah position. On the 21st in the morning under intense Artillery bombardment, our Infantry moved to the attack. On their right, the troops got to within 100 yards of the enemy's line, but were unable to advance further. By 1 p.m., the heavy rain had converted the ground into a sea of mud, rendering rapid movement impossible. The British troops maintained their position until dark and then slowly withdrew to the main tranches which had been previously occupied for about 1,300 yards from those of the Ottomans.

Major. General Charles Townshend's collection of letters was made into a book called *My Campaign*. This book was published on 1920 in New York by the James McCann Company. In this book, we follow what Townshend who explains his perspective of what had happened. When describing the defense of Kut, he explains what was necessary to win. The strategy was to hold Kut, the junction of the Tigris and Hai Rivers (this would connect the Tigris and the Euphrates). Townshend blocked the advance of the 6th Turkish Army because they were dependent on water

transport as the British were. So long as the Ottomans steamers and lighters could not pass, the British felt they would win. Kut had to be held according to Townshend. German officers, led by Marshal Von de Goltz had just arrived with troops to take command of the 6th Turkish Army. The British were prepared for it. Townshend determined to defend Kut by maneuver on a central position. He intended to use his entrenched camp as a pivot of maneuver. This would be done by improvising a bridge and a fortified bridgehead. This is described by Townshend as a defensive-offensive battle. Townshend knew he did not have enough men to defend the front “the generally accepted principle demands three to five men per running yard of defence so that it will be seen that I had not enough men for the defence of my land front alone” (Townshend 1920, 11). Townshend knew from his military history that the fort could not be held without future reinforcements. He even predicted the fall of the fort due to not having enough food and disease saying “we were to be conquered by famine” (Townshend 1920, 23). Townshend knew what was coming from the Ottomans and Germans; it was evident that the fort at the north-eastern end of the British’s northern front was the enemy’s main objective. The Ottomans artillery constantly shelled it; large breaches were made, and parts of the wall fell in. The British had lost Kut after this.

At the first attempt to relieve Kut, local Arabs who were not part of the fight told the Ottomans where the headquarters of the British would be bombed. The Ottomans were not messing around, some of their soldiers

shot at women and children at night when they got water. The Ottomans used hollow bullets which caused more injury than standard bullets. Townshend had received a message from General Aylmer on January 20th 1916 that he was ready to attack. The assault had been repulsed by January 21st by 2 p.m. It was "the worst news we had received during the siege" (Townshend 1920, 88). It was expected that Aylmer could do nothing to aid him until reinforcements reached him. A further advance was impossible at present, he suggested that Aylmer should establish himself on the best position he could find, holding both banks of the river, connected by a bridge behind him. Times got desperate. Soldiers began eating horse; the Hindus had no drawback from this. The British had fourteen days of full rations for the troops. Fodder up to the 25th, and thirty days grain for the animals, with ten days tea for British units and we had also ten days supply of country flour, purchased from the inhabitants. Townshend decided to put troops on half rations and lay hands on all the foodstuffs in the town. Townshend saw the effects of short rations first hand "my troops are ready to live on short rations, but they will become weak, and desertion amongst the Indian troops will increase" (Townshend 1920, 157). The war was getting ugly when Germany armed the Ottomans with poison gas, Townshend mocked this practice. Jumping ahead to April, at about 11 p.m. on 9th of April, Townshend received a telegram from Gorringe that the Ottomans attacked the Sannaiyat trenches, but the British failed to win. The corps composing the Tigris was now at 29,000 bayonets, 1,500 sabers, and 133

guns. The Indian troops at Kut were now very dejected, and there were desertions or attempted to desert ever night. The British "had to shoot more of them" (Townshend 1920, 227). Townshend had surrender to Khalil Pachs, a leader of the Ottoman troops. Townshend was noble about this. Khalil told him that he should be sent to Constantinople and would be honored as a guest of the Turkish nation. Townshend lived comfortably in Istanbul.

The British were able to hold Kut after the second capture of Kut (February 17th 1917). The three battles of significance were the Fall of Baghdad, Samarrah Offensive, and the Battle of Sharqat. The Fall of Baghdad was led by Khalil Pasha; he had 12,500 men available to him including approximately 2,300 survivors of the fall of Kut. British commander in chief Sir Frederick Maude led the battle. He wrote "it seemed clear from the outset that the true solution of the problem was a resolute offensive, with concentrated forces, on the Tigris, thus effectively threatening Baghdad, the centre from which the enemy's columns were operating." British commander in chief Maude stated his advance along each bank of the Tigris. Within 3 days, he reached the Diyala. Immediately at that time, the British armies attempted to cross the rapid flowing river but were unsuccessful. Maude ordered his army to cross the west bank by the Pontoon bridge several kilometers downstream hoping to outflank Khalil. Airstrikes were expected to come from the German, but this neglected by Khalil. He left only one regiment to defend Diyala and it quickly fell to the British. This would prove to be the beginning of the end of

the Ottomans in Mesopotamia. The Ottomans spirits were just about crushed by this point. Immediately after securing Baghdad, Maude launched a new offensive to consolidate the new Anglo-Indian position and this effort became known as the Samarrah Offensive. Like the Battle of Bagdad, Maude's 45,000 troops were to fight against the Turkish army led by Khalil Pasha. Pasha had 10,000 troops in addition to Ali Ishan Bey's 15,000 troops who were retreating from Persia at the hands of the Russians. Maude's immediate goal in the offensive was to seize control of the Samarrah railway. His plan was to initiate a series of small scale attacks up the Tigris River. This was done in order to prevent deliberate Turkish flooding of the plains around the Euphrates River; to prevent Ali Ishan Bey's force of 15,000 men from rendezvousing with Khalil and to conduct holding operations in the west. In less than a week later, Maude seized Fallujah preventing the Ottomans from flooding the plains. Six days later, his attempt to encircle Bey's men was repelled and as a result, the Ottoman defense fell back to the junction of the Tigris and Adhaim Rivers. The British attacked this position and forced Khalil to move back to a position between the Tigris and the Al Jali Canal. Maude persisted in attacking the Ottomans and on April 23rd 1917, the British ceded Samarrah and the railway to the British. The Samarrah offensive was costly to the British; casualties amounted to 18,000 and an additional 40,000 were lost to sickness. The Battle of Sharqat was the end of the war. It was important in that Commander in Chief Sir William Marshall secured control of the Mosul

oilfields in Northern Bagdad. He did so by conducting two advances up the Euphrates and the Tigris Rivers. The advance up the Tigris River was limited however due to the lack of available transport. Under the direction of Sir Alexander Cobbe (an Anglo-Indian) left Bagdad and traveled 120km reaching Little Zab River. There, they would battle the Ottoman army led by Ismail Hakki Bey. As dawn broke, the Middlesex moved away from the river in artillery formation and were ordered to lie down in all available cover. Immediately after this movement had taken place, the enemy’s guns opened fire. It was then that the position selected by the brigade was exceptionally bad as for the mounds acted as targets for the Ottoman gunmen. The British would set up new positions then along the river and in a short while after intense fighting, the white flag was raised by the Ottoman army. The Ottomans were upset that they lost Mosul as they felt it was part of their land. A new country called Turkey was formed and the dispute was to be settled at a conference for a treat called the Treaty of Sevres.

The Treaty of the Sevres was signed on August 10th 1920. This treaty was signed by most of the Ally powers and the Ottoman Empire. This created the independent states of Palestine, Egypt, Lebanon, Syria, and Iraq. Syria and Lebanon were to be held by the French while the British got Palestine, Egypt, and Iraq. This proved not to work well as many uprisings happened in Syria, Iraq, and Lebanon. The zones of influence were drawn up by having part of left Turkey to the Greeks, Italians, and the International Community. The Greeks got part of the west, Armenians got

part of the right of the Turkey, and the French got part of lower Turkey. The middle was to be held by Turkish people. The French would influence part of the middle of Turkey. The Kurds were to gain the lower right part of Turkey which would be influenced by Britain and France. This would turn into a disaster and would lead to a war of independence in Turkey. This was resolved by leaving all land of Turkey to the Young Turks. The Young Turks ended what was left of the Ottoman ideology. This leaves the question, why divide up so much land with so many parties? This would surely lead to never ending war and would eventually create small countries with no power very little resources.

What needs to be addressed is why exactly Britain felt it necessary to attack from Mesopotamia. The war took place in Europe. The narrative was that Germany is expanding throughout Europe. Why not send troops in India through Egypt and into Italy to fight Germany? Why was Mesopotamia so crucial? The reason for this is that Britain wanted to destabilize the Ottoman Empire and end it by pinning its colonies and neighbors against it for Britain’s gain. The common response to this is that Britain wanted to cut off Germany’s imports, but that doesn’t hold up well. Germany was set to capture France. By mid December 1917, Russia surrendered. Britain must have known by 1915 that Russia was going to fall given that Russia was an under industrialized nation. The 300,000+ British troops never had to go to Iraq. Infact, the Allies got so desperate for troops that they had finally convinced the Americans to fight on their behalf on August 6th 1917. This

outraged American citizens as they felt that it was not their war to fight and this resulted in many being jailed for protesting. If most of Europe was to be saved from falling, then the troops sent in would have helped prevent a collapse. Luckily for the Allies, Germany fell from uprisings, protests and citizens not showing up to work. Germany did win the war, but lost the fight for survival. To summarize, Germany did not pose a threat to Britain, and Britain was never concerned about Europe.

World War 1 led to chaos in Europe as the Austrian- Hungarian Empire and the German Empire fell. This was because of the treaty of Versailles that made Germany pay for 100,000 tons of gold for the war. They also had to give up all of their cows to France along with the contested Alsace-Loraine. Austria-Hungary split because of bankruptcy and protests creating smaller states and lost part of their land to their neighbors as well. At no point in the war did Britain offer a truce with the Axis. With this information presented, can we question if Britain was at all responsible for the destruction of Europe and the Middle East being destabilized? Can we also say that Britain benefited from the war by being the only empire aside from America after it? This perspective is not available in our textbooks distributed in our schools in America. This is relevant to today because the same narrative from the victors of the Iraq War can claim that the UN had enough evidence to believe that there were WMD’s in Iraq. Maybe, just maybe the historians got this one wrong with the Treaty of Sevres and the Treaty of Versailles. We are revising our views from issues thousands of

years ago. World War 1 and the Mesopotamian Campaign should no doubt be reinvestigated. So I ask whoever is reading this, was World War 1 an imperial attempt by Britain?